Must Antiques Be Technically Excellent? A Rejoinder to Killin

In "What Is an Antique?" (2016), we argued that the concept of an antique is an adjectival concept: it does not pick out a kind of object, but rather applies to objects of some preexisting kind K (and in particular, some preexisting *artifactual* kind K). We focused on nonart objects and argued for the following definition of what conditions a nonart object of a particular kind K must meet in order to be an antique:

> An object *x* of an artifactual kind K is an antique K iff *x* exemplifies technical excellence (for a K) and was made in a style and using a method of production (for making Ks) that subsequently became obsolete but is exemplary of (and so rooted in) the era and place in which the K was made. (Curtis and Baines 2016, 81)

As it will be important in what follows, it is also worth mentioning up front that this definition was supposed to be taken in a broadly prescriptive sense. We think there is some kind of mistake being made by someone who calls objects failing to meet our definition 'antiques' and that as such they should not call them so.

In his response, Anton Killin (2017) takes issue with a certain aspect of our definition. He agrees with our view that the concept of an antique is an adjectival one and is at least happy to grant that those elements of the definition that relate to age are correct. But he takes issue with the idea that technical excellence is a necessary condition for being an antique. In addition to this, he also criticizes us for largely excluding art objects from our discussion. In this rejoinder we focus mainly on defending the technical excellence criterion. But we will have something to say about art objects too, and we begin with a few words about them.

In short, we are in agreement with much of what Killin says about art objects. We agree that there are good questions to be asked about the relationship between the concept of being an artwork and the concept of being an antique, and we agree that there are good questions to be asked about whether antique art objects themselves have a distinctive aesthetic value. Indeed, we signaled as much in our previous article (84n.10 and n.12). And we agree with Killin that it is plausible that with regards to art objects, a different conception of antiqueness is at issue than with regards to nonart objects. Indeed, this is precisely our view, and this is why we excluded art objects from our discussion. Killin does go on to say that whether this is so "remains to be established" (2017, 197), and with this we are also in agreement. But we think that there are sufficient grounds for thinking it to be true and so sufficient grounds to proceed as if it were true. Indeed, much of what Killin says offers *more* evidence for the truth of this view. In particular, he notes that antique art objects do not have to meet the technical excellence criterion, while on our view antique nonart objects do have to meet it. Killin himself seems to think that this is a reason for rejecting the technical excellence criterion, and in fact he thinks that this points toward an inconsistency in our account (196). However, on the contrary, we think this provides further reason for sharply distinguishing between antique art objects and antique nonart objects. We will elaborate on this point later, once we have dealt with Killin's independent arguments against the technical excellence criterion.

Killin argues for the thesis that objects that lack technical excellence can still be antiques by way of example. For the sake of argument, he concedes our claim that a modern mass-produced particle-board desk lacks technical excellence, but goes on to argue that, despite this, it is still a candidate for being an antique. He says, "I think it straightforwardly plausible that whether any modern, mass-produced desks will one day appear in antique stores and auction houses as genuinely antique pieces is an open question" (195). As an initial response, we first wish to point out that Killin's talk about such desks appearing in antique stores and auction houses is a red herring. For one, a great number of fake items often appear in antique stores and auction houses. For another, items that are clearly not antiques (and not presented as such), but that have a good chance of selling nonetheless, often appear in antiques stores and auction houses (which are businesses, after all). Our local auction house is this week selling a pair of ten-year-old concrete garden planters, for example. And so, whether an item is likely to appear in an antique store or auction house can have, in and of itself, no bearing upon whether we should consider it to be antique. What does the work for Killin here is not the fact that modern particle-board desks may appear in antique stores and auction houses someday, but that that they

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may appear there "as *genuinely* antique pieces." But this, obviously enough, is not yet to say anything substantive, for the question of what counts as a genuinely antique piece is precisely what is at issue.

However, Killin says more. First, he argues that despite lacking technical excellence a modern particle-board desk may count as being a genuinely antique piece in virtue of having historical significance. He writes, "Its value as an antique may lie, at least in part, in the fact that that desk was used by [some historically significant] figure to compose a particular symphony or revolutionary political speech, for instance" (195). We reject this point. To see why, first remember that our definition was constructed in order to give the thesis that antiques are objects of distinctive aesthetic value a chance of being true. We will say more about this aspect of our definition shortly, but for now the important point is that *having historical significance* can certainly add monetary value to an object (that is, because folk are willing to pay more for such items), and it may even add aesthetic value. But, we do not think it can add the *kind* of aesthetic value that is *distinctive* of the aesthetic value antiques possess. This is for the simple reason that items that are clearly not antiques can possess the kind of value that historical significance bestows upon an item (and command high prices in virtue of this). In our original paper, for example, we argued that nails are not the right kind of objects to be antiques. But a nail could well have historical significance and so possess the kind of value this bestows upon an item. Furthermore, many newly made items already possess historical significance, despite clearly failing to possess the value that antiques possess. Consider the Century II black lacquer and gold roller ball pen that Donald Trump used to sign his first bill after inauguration (that was then handed out to a lucky guest). That pen, it seems clear enough, already has historical significance, and so the value that this bestows, but it does not possess the kind of value that antiques possess. And so, it seems clear to us, the value an object has in virtue of being historically significant is one thing, and the value it has in virtue of being an antique another. A modern particle-board desk with historical significance may well someday appear in an antique store or auction house, but it will not so appear as a genuinely antique piece.

There is one further point that Killin makes regarding the technical excellence criterion. He argues that if a modern particle board desk does one day appear in an antique store or auction house and were to be considered as an antique by antique collectors and dealers, then we would be committed to thinking "that the antique collectors and dealers are simply getting it wrong in this case and ought to take heed of the prescriptivity of [our] conceptual analysis" (Killin 2017, 195) On this point, we agree: Yes, we think they *would* simply be getting it wrong. The concept of an antique, we have no doubt, is a messy one that is used by dealers and collectors in inconsistent ways. But, to emphasize once more, we think that central to the concept (that is, as it is used by collectors and dealers) is that it picks out a category of item with a *distinctive* kind of aesthetic value. If dealers and collectors were to think of an item as having that distinctive value in virtue of its possessing historical significance, then as we have argued here, this would be inconsistent with this central use and so would be a mistake.

We finish our comments about technical excellence with a further brief positive argument in favor of the technical excellence criterion, which will also lay the ground for some further brief remarks about art objects. First, let us distinguish between two ways in which a thing may alter with regards to its aesthetic value. First, a thing may alter by gaining an entirely *new* kind of value. Plausibly, for example, sculpting a lump of clay into the form of a statue bestows upon it an entirely new kind of value. But second, a thing may alter in virtue of some existing kind of value being modified. Plausibly, for example, polishing a slightly dulled gold amulet does *not* bestow upon it an entirely new kind of value. Rather, polishing the amulet *modifies* the value it already possesses. That is to say, its new value is itself *adjectival*. Or, in a slogan: its preexisting value is made to *shine*. But now, let us ask how an object alters with regards to its aesthetic properties when it becomes an antique. We have already argued that the concept of an antique is an adjectival one, namely, that when an object becomes an antique it does not become a new kind of thing. Similarly, it seems entirely plausible that the value an object gains when it becomes an antique is *also* adjectival, that is, as we have put it, that its preexisting value comes to shine. Antiques, on this view, do not possess a different kind of value from

similar newly made items. Rather, they possess the same kind of value, but in a distinctive way. This supports the technical excellence criterion simply because in order for an object to become an antique it must already possess a certain kind of aesthetic value, and the only kind available (so far as we can see) is the kind it possesses in virtue of exemplifying technical excellence. To put the point somewhat crudely: one cannot polish a turd.

To conclude, in light of the above discussion, we return briefly to the issue of art objects. As mentioned above, Killin notes that art objects do not have to be technically excellent (that is, for the simple reason that there can be bad art as well as good art) and that because art objects can be antiques, this points toward an inconsistency in our account and provides a reason for rejecting the technical excellence criterion. He "demonstrates" the inconsistency with the following example:

> The artworld might bestow art status upon a (technically nonexcellent) modern, mass-produced desk (it might have been put forward as a readymade piece by a highly esteemed artist, for instance), yet its technical facility is not improved upon by this new value (that is, art status), nor does its technical facility undergo an upgrade by becoming an item traded and collected by antique dealers and aficionados in due course, were that to be the case. (Killin 2017, 196)

There is much to be said about this example, but there is no inconsistency demonstrated here. First, although it would require further argument to fully establish, it seems clear that the concept of an art object is *not* an adjectival concept. Art objects, that is, are objects of their own particular kind. As such, if a modern mass-produced desk is put forward as a readymade piece, this is to bring into existence a new kind of object (namely, the art object itself) that is materially constituted by the desk, but nonidentical with it. So, we think Killin's example does nothing to show that a modern mass-produced desk can *itself* be an antique. It is the art object, and not the materially coincident but nonidentical desk, that would become an antique in this case. But second, what we think Killin's example does show is this: art objects have a particular kind of aesthetic value of their own, and one that does *not* depend upon their being technically excellent. As a consequence, when art objects become antiques, it is this preexisting *artistic* value that is modified and made to shine. However, far from telling against the view that nonart objects must possess technical excellence in order to become antiques, this bolsters that view: Both art objects and nonart objects must possess some preexisting aesthetic value in order to become antiques. Art objects possess such value by default in virtue of being art objects, but nonart objects do not. As such, they must possess it in virtue of some other property, which we suggest is the property of exemplifying technical excellence. And so, this bolsters the view that the conditions that art objects must meet in order to be antiques are distinct from the conditions nonart objects must meet. And so, we conclude, Killin's criticism of our account is misguided.

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